

## THE [LATIN] MODERNISM OF PONTI, COSTA AND BARRAGÁN

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### Abstract

*The work of Italian architect and designer Gio Ponti was for a long time removed from Italian architectural historiography, relying mostly on the difficulties of classifying it between rationalist codes or traditional/local and classic ones. During the 1950's Ponti travelled extensively abroad, but it was in Latin America where he faced an architectural repertory expressed on a way which had a profound impact in his polymorphic career. While in Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico, Ponti could identify with a certain modern reasoning not only on a vernacular and local basis, but also rooted on a classical and Mediterranean one. Brought by the Europeans and local architects that studied abroad, these roots were reinterpreted locally to be the basis of some of the works of Lucio Costa in Brazil and Barragán in Mexico. A result of the of cross-cultural relations, these expressions cannot be taxed merely as a 'regionalist architecture' though, as this could reduce them to a superficial dichotomy as 'there is no pure regional or international style whatsoever'. Instead, these architects shared a common reasoning on how and what to consider as their tradition, which included formal and cultural repertoires, construction techniques, climate responsiveness, and ways of living. Therefore, this article aimed to identify and analyse thru a 'comparative and transnational' approach, the effects and common aspects that the overseas incursions of three modernists masters - Lucio Costa, Barragan and Gio Ponti, had on their work.*

**Keywords:** Gio Ponti, Barragán, Lucio Costa, Latin Modernism, vernacular.

### Introduction

As D. J. Huppatz (2015: 188) declared, most narratives of Modern design are still 'based on a 'diffusionist model;' following 'typically' Nicolaus Pevsner's writings on *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), they reiterate a Eurocentric tendency of a centre-periphery flow of knowledge. Patricio De Real (2015) on his introduction piece for the catalogue's bibliography of the recent 2015's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition - *Latin America in Construction: Architecture 1955-1980*, addressed some key aspects of Latin

America's written history of modern architecture. Corroborating with Huppatz's line of thought, Del Real appointed Bruno Zevi's accounts together with Pevsner's as being responsible for having initiated the historiographic tendency of assuming Latin America's architectural achievements *'as merely derivative of European models,'* with *'limited contributions to international discussions and formal explorations'* (Del Real, p. 296). Del Real concluded by reminding us that, *'if the history of modern architecture in Latin America is on its way to being consolidated, a history of modernism, one that incorporates the region's development, produced both from outside and from within the region, remains very much in construction'* (Del Real, p.297). Likewise, to Huppatz (2015: 195), the importance of *'establishing a global framework for design history'* involves including local, regional and national histories. In order to do that though, besides *'reframing existing knowledge as to avoid European exceptionalism,'* Huppatz (2015: 195) appointed that we must develop *'a better understanding of the multi-directional nature of flows'*, regarding not only the designed objects, but also the designers involved, their movements, interactions and flow of information. Although Esra Ackan (2014: 119,120) discussed Post-colonial theories on architecture as a *'new way of understanding "non-Western" contexts'* and, therefore, challenging the Eurocentric canon, Elisabetta Andreoli and Adrian Forty (2004: 14,15) raised the issue that *'cultural exchanges are never simply unidirectional - as much as the colonizer tries to resist and refute this idea, he is as affected by the cultural shock just as the colonized is.'* Challenging already assumed positions, Del Real and Helen Gyger's (2013: 22) recent collection of essays on Latin American Modern Architecture presented studies of important figures of Modernism in *'non-canonical contexts'*. In that sense, Gio Ponti's Latin American incursions on the 1950's are here presented as an opportunity to benefit from such re-examination. Ponti travelled extensively abroad during the 1950's, but it was in Latin America where he faced an architectural repertory expressed on a way which had a profound impact in his career. While in Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico, Ponti recognized a certain modern reasoning rooted not only on a vernacular and local foundation, but also on a classical and Mediterranean one. Brought by the Europeans and developed by local architects that studied abroad, these roots were reinterpreted locally to be the basis of

some of the works of Lucio Costa in Brazil and Barragán in Mexico. Although the works of these three figures could be interpreted as '*regionalist architectures*', this categorization may lead, as Akcan (2010: 193) explained, to a '*bipolar*' interpretation of modern architecture in '*non-Western*' countries, where modern is confronted with regional; national with the international. But such a constraint - to Akcan (2010: 193)- reduces the '*complexities of cross-cultural relations*' to a superficial dichotomy as '*there is no pure regional or international style of expression*'.<sup>1</sup> Instead, these architects shared a common ground on how and what to consider as their tradition, which included formal and cultural repertoires, construction techniques, climate responsiveness, and ways of living. Following Del Real and Gyger's (2013: 24) proposals, this article aimed to identify and analyse thru a '*comparative and transnational*' approach, the effects and common aspects that the overseas incursions of three modernists masters - Lucio Costa, Barragán and Gio Ponti, had on their work.

### **Ponti, Barragán and Mexico**

By the mid-1970s, Barragán's work was largely unappreciated, if not actually dismissed, inside Mexico and unknown outside of it. Yet, if his architecture remained suspect in some Mexican circles - on account of its elitism and idiosyncrasy, its aloof distance from the more pragmatic, socially oriented concerns of other prominent architects operating in that nation - it was soon validated internationally for its formal and poetic qualities (Eggner, 2002, p. 230).

Barragán in his 1980 Pritzker Prize acceptance speech concurred to Jay Pritzker's words in declaring what he considered '*essential*' regarding his work ideology - to have devoted himself to architecture '*as a sublime act of poetic*

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<sup>1</sup> As an alternative Akcan presents the use of translation as a 'conceptual framework that explains modernization in terms of the interaction between different places and nation-states, [...] [discussing] the mutual dependence and interaction between different countries, and traces of the flows of people, ideas, images, information, and technologies across geographical space, as well as their varying degrees and modes of transformations at the new destinations.' E. Ackan, Bruno Taut's translations out of Germany. Toward a cosmopolitan ethics in architecture, in: *Modern Architecture and the Mediterranean: vernacular dialogues and contested identities*, J.F. Lejeune, M. Sabatino (eds), Routledge, 2009, p.193.

*imagination*' (Barragán, 1980). But, as Liernur (1995: 6) explained, what gave Barragán's architecture its *'inebriant quality'* were the dense relationships of designed spaces inhabited simultaneously by many dichotomies such as *'romanticism and classicism, tradition and modernity, clarity and mystery.'* According to Lucía S. A. Lozada (2016: 134,135), Barragán's architecture was the result of the *'decantation of different traditions,'* ranging from *'European, American, Mexican and Asian sources.'* These external influences emerged early in his career, as a result of different trips abroad starting in 1925, after his graduation, where he visited in Spain the Moorish gardens of Alhambra and Generalife in Andalusia. On this trip he also went to Paris, to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts decoratives et industriels modernes*, and, besides getting in touch with Le Corbusier's work, he discovered the Mediterranean garden designs and writings by architect and landscaper Ferdinand Bac (Lozada, 2016). To Juan P. Vereá (2013: 52), Bac advocated a return to the *'old Mediterranean spirit,'* one that brought together *'a disenchanting pagan asepticism,'* with the *'treasures of the classic antiquity'* transmitted by the Moorish culture. When Barragán went back to Mexico, he decided to make explicit the close relation of that *'almost forgotten inheritance'* with the traditional constructions of his home land of Jalisco, of *'similar climate, sky and culture'* (Vereá, p. 52). As Marco De Michelis (2001: 46) explained, by then the state of Jalisco was in conflict with the Mexican central government and in search of its autonomy, which reinforced the *'search for a specific local cultural tradition'*. In that scenario, Barragán and his companions – Rafael Urzúa, Pedro Castellanos and Ignacio Diaz Morales, *'sought to express a response'* (De Michelis, p. 47). That effort was, according to Claudia Velásquez (2015: 29), the basis for the foundation of the *tapatia* school, one that advocated a *'local as well as universal [architecture], adjusted to the cultural needs and economic momentum'*. Velásquez appointed as elements and resources of the modern *tapatia* architecture a combination of new techniques with a reinterpretation of traditional construction strategies and elements. Porticoes, terraces and patios of traditional farm houses and public buildings were employed altogether with the dominance of massive walls over voids. Another feature was the importance of the sky as another elevation, and the use of jalousies to filter light and give privacy (Velásquez, p.32, 33). On

1931 while in New York, Barragán took the opportunity to get in contact with Jalisco painter Jose Clemente Orozco - who was also in search for the *'essential roots in modernity'* and Austrian Functionalist architect, Frederick Kiesler; later in that year he went to Paris, where he finally met Ferdinand Bac and Le Corbusier (De Michelis, p.52). In 1935 Barragán moved to Mexico City; and from 1945 to 1950 he was involved with the gardens and urbanization of El Pedregal de San Angel. During that period, he designed his house and atelier in Tacubaya and the Prieto Lopez house (1948-49), located in El Pedregal urbanization. To Bendimez (2013: 124), the Prieto house was *'a synthesis between the tradition of the great Mexican country houses and the modern dwelling [...] It has an scale that relates it with the great colonial houses and everything on it - gardens, patios, pools, decoration, finishing, demonstrate a surprising consistency.'* In 1952 Barragán returned to the Mediterranean area: he visited Italy and in the North of Africa, the Magreb. To Lozada, *'this encounter with the Mediterranean architecture [confirmed] the idea acquired by Barragán at the Alhambra, the sensations and effects that a heavy wall can create in an architectural space through the use of it'* (Lozada, p. 133). In 1967 Barragán realized, according to Guillermo E. Bendiméz (2013), one of his most outstanding architectural and landscape works - the San Cristobal stables in Zaragoza. In 1980, Barragán declared that

*'the lessons [to be] learned from the [...] architecture of [...] the provincial towns of my country have been a permanent source of inspiration. Such as, for instance, the whitewashed walls; the peace to be found in patios and orchards; the colorful streets; [...] As there is a deep historical link between these teachings and those of the North African and Moroccan Villages, they too have enriched my perception of beauty in architectural simplicity.'* (Barragán, 1980, p. 2).

The Gio Ponti Epistolary Archives evidences a lasting friendship of Ponti and Barragán dating from 1964 to 1979, until the former's passing away. In 1935 Ponti published in *Domus* for the first time the work of Barragán (Ponti, no. 92, 1935). The article depicted Barragán's 1931 renovation of the family ranch in

Chapala and the 1934's Harper Garibi and Emiliano Robles Leon houses. On a brief note Ponti called attention to the readers to the '*wall bonds, stairs arrangements, massive volumes and shadows effects*' under the intensity of the sky, characteristics also of the Mediterranean accents promulgated by Ponti's proposals at the time. In 1952, after his first trip to Brazil that year, Ponti went to Mexico to the VIII Panamerican congress, when he took the opportunity to visit El Pedregal and Barragán's house. Published in a Domus article in 1953, Ponti (1953, no. 280) stressed the importance of considering architecture as art and in that case, made explicit Barragán's poetic dimension when creating a landscape: '*a lyrical and ascetic atmosphere exists in this spaces by Barragán: the terraces are rooms completed by the sky, separated from earth; the garden has the trees as prisoners; the staircase is for only one person [...] The house is a retreat.*' Later, Ponti appointed the influence of Barragán's design strategies in his design reasoning during the 1950's. First on an article of his Dr. Taglianetti's house design in São Paulo – when referring to its gardens as an '*hortus conclusus*'; bounded by high walls and presenting the sky as another elevation – a feature also depicted in his 1930's Mediterranean partnerships with Bernard Rudofsky and the Venezuelan Villa Planchart (Ponti, Domus, no. 283, 1953; Ponti, Domus no.303, 1955). The second opportunity was, as Ponti stated, by '*contradiction.*' When regarding the importance of lightness in his Villa Planchart's design in contrast to El Pedregal's massiveness, Ponti declared: '*the idea that a construction "rests on the land" like a butterfly, instead, comes as a contrast, observing the marvellous volcanic garden of El Pedregal [...] Since that I have dreamed [instead] of a house that would rest nicely on the land, like a butterfly (white) without volume or mass.*' (Ponti, Domus, no. 303, 1955). On 1956, Ponti (1956, no. 321) published the Prieto López house (1948-49) in the urbanization of El Pedregal along with images of Barragán's house. He evidenced the wall treatments and the use of terraces: '*terraces [made] of walls like rooms, completed by the sky and separated of the ground.*' In 1968, on the pages of Domus Ponti (1968, no. 468) depicted this time the walled stables of San Cristobal (1967-68).

## Ponti, Brazil and Costa

For distinct reasons, Brazil and Italy entered the XXth century still defining their cultural identity as modern nations, besides being outdated culturally, economically and technologically in relation to more industrialized countries. To overcome this situation, [...] they both searched in their pasts the foundations to build their identities. [...] Like the Brazilians, the Italians lived out of the centers where the new modern proposals were been produced, inputting on them the development of selection criteria and ways of adapting these proposals to their climatic, productive and cultural conditions. [...] (Anelli, 2010, p.10).

According to Andreoli and Forty (2004: 11), since its beginning, Brazil's modernism was considered a '*genuinely national*' manifestation, acclaimed by its divergence from the main western cannon. Albeit that, as Carlos Comas (2002: 1) explained, during the 1930's in Brazil '*an appropriation of modern architecture which [emphasized] its classical Mediterranean roots and the analogy of its elements and principles with a rational and national constructive tradition*' was taking place, '*[culminating] in the equation of a modern architecture of Corbusian vein and Brazilian flavour*' at the end of that decade. In this scenario, as Guilherme Wisnick (2001: 7) reminds us, architect Lucio Costa is regarded as a key-figure in the implementation of modern architecture in Brazil. This role was consolidated on 1936, when he overtook the leadership of the design team for the Ministry of Education and Public Health in the Brazilian capital of Rio de Janeiro. In fact, since the 1930's, Costa employed on his designs elements of colonial Luso-Brazilian architecture like the patio and the veranda (Wisnick, 2001, p.37; Carlucci, 2005, p. 113). Acting as instruments of design generation and articulation, together with the *muxarabies*, they connected internal and external spaces without prejudice to privacy (Carlucci, 2005, 59). According to Comas (2002: 6), '*the use of Luso-Brazilian architecture as an iconographic source*' by Costa affirmed '*the exploration of vernacular autochthonous without dissolving the link with the machine.*' Parallel to Le Corbusier's attempts with the '*Mediterranean vernacular,*' as Comas (2004: 23)

reiterated, Costa was claiming an inheritance when advocating '*a Mediterranean crib for modern architecture and associating it with Le Corbusier [...] Although bastard, by genetics, acculturation or transculturation, the Brazilian architect [could not] escape being western*'. Costa's theoretical model was consolidated on writings from 1945 which were published only on 1952, under the Brazilian Ministry of Education and Health's seal (Costa, 1952). On his writings, Costa distinguished two main cultural axes regarding the '*plastic conception of form*': a Nordic-Eastern one, connected to a '*gothic exuberance*', '*dynamic*' in contrast to a Mesopotamian-Mediterranean one, from the southern Europe and Northern Africa, of '*geometric purity*', '*static*' (Costa, 1952, p. 10, 11, 12). To Costa, the colonial architecture of the Spanish and Portuguese America while belonging in its origins to the Mediterranean tradition was also developed on the Baroque cycle of the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries, therefore drinking from both sources (Costa, 1952, p. 17). Costa concluded therefore, that Modern art and architecture should come as the result of the fusion of both concepts: *plastic-ideal* (western) and *organic-functional* (eastern). As Wisnick (2001: 16) appointed, Costa linked Brazilian construction to a '*combined genealogy: popular thru an erudite way, on which the Mediterranean tradition ended on Modernism*'. On 1948, the director of SPHAN requested Costa to travel to Portugal to conduct studies '*in order to elucidate the capital points of Portuguese influence in the formation and evolution of the plastic arts in Brazil*' (Franco de Andrade apud Piccarolo, 2013, p.41).<sup>2</sup> From this trip Costa concluded that due to the variation of architectural typologies present on different regions of Portugal, '*it was impossible to establish coherent lines of derivation for their colonial developments*' (Piccarolo, 2013, p. 42). Therefore, as Gaia Piccarolo explained, this allowed him to '*conceive of an independent development of Portuguese architecture in the colony*', one that also '*[...] demonstrated its "own personality" and was as authentic as legitimate as the original*' (Piccarolo, 2013, p.42).

Ponti, strain to any adoption of established dogmas (Ponzio, 2013, p.14), always evaluated design ideas which he somehow could relate to, and in his Latin American incursions that was no exception. If in Mexico, Ponti related to

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<sup>2</sup> Costa returned to Portugal on 1952, spending the whole year there, in order to continue his studies. Piccarolo, 2013, p.42.



Barragán's interpretations of traditional Mexican architecture, in Brazil it was an early reading of the Brazilian modernism that called his attention - before Brasília but related to Costa's theories,<sup>3</sup> specially in the use of *brise-soleils*, patios, ceramic panels (with azulejos), *cobogós*<sup>4</sup> and inner tropical gardens. Moreover, Ponti's visual sequences depicted usually on his 'animated' plans - dating as far as his collaborations with Rudofsky in the Mediterranean area (Miodini, 2001, p.23), can be associated to Guilherme Wisnik's (2001: 38) '*domestic experience*' of Costa and Barragán: a '*succession of spaces in which the diverse activities of the private sphere correspond to affective places in harmony with the temperament of those who live in it.*'

## Conclusion

[...] the framing of modern Brazilian architecture in a national or regional modernism is a half-truth. Promoted by Germanic or Anglo-Saxon historians [...], it obscures both the international dimension of the affirmation of national identity since the 1930s and the international dimension in the Brazilian contribution to modern architecture [...] A incompatibility between modern and national is a construct that does not resist not even to a superficial analysis but strengthen the European and North-American cultural domination. (Comas, 2006, p.26)

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<sup>3</sup> Although Ponti acknowledged and published a few of Lucio Costa's works on Domus from 1950 to 1960, there were not found evidences of a personal encounter of both figures, since in 1952, when Ponti was in Brazil, Costa was in Europe.

<sup>4</sup> Muxarabiê (in Arabic: Masharabiya): brought by the Iberian settlers to Latin America and Brazil; 'Commonly used to designate windows or grills with latticed work screen of turned or carved wood. Mashrabiya were a hallmark of Islamic domestic architecture. These windows provided protection from the sunrays and offered privacy to women from passers-by'. Gelosia or graticci are vernacular Italian screens made of brick or wood 'used to filter light [allowing] for continuous air circulation'; 'Cobogó appeared in the 1920s, in Recife, and its name come from the combination of the first syllable of the last names of their creators. They are an inheritance of Arab culture, based on muxarabies - built in wood, were used to partially close the internal environments. [...] Despite the visual permeability, cobogós, in a way, bring privacy to the user. Made of concrete and brick at the beginning, they began to be produced also in ceramics and other different materials.' [http://www.aucegypt.edu/walking\\_tours/cairo/glossary/glossary.html](http://www.aucegypt.edu/walking_tours/cairo/glossary/glossary.html); <https://www.archdaily.com/875130/cobogos-a-brief-history-and-its-uses> <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/gelosia/>;

As Miodini (2001: 33) mentioned, Ponti's insertion in Modern Italian historiography has been a difficult task; not a modern or traditionalist, until the 1960's he was absent from many important historical accounts, only coming back to the scene from the 1980's on. Added to that, despite not explicitly willing to elaborate theories, Ponti's work shares a position similar to what Fernandez (2009: 7) identified on Costa and Barragán's: '*they choose a register of their thinking/acting distant from the historiographical canon of modernity (as Gideon's or Frampton's), getting closer to a kind of programmed anachronism as an evident and calculated path [...].*' Sharing a common interest on vernacular, classical and Mediterranean traditions, Ponti, Costa and Barragán, each on their manner, transposed modern reasoning to a vernacular and local basis. This included, as appointed earlier, formal and cultural repertoires, construction techniques, climate responsiveness, and ways of living. If Lejeune and Sabatino (2010: 5) designated a '*Mediterranean modernism*,' on this case it would be more suitable to refer to a '*Latin Modernism*' - one that travelled back and forth across the ocean, sharing a common base.

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